

Summary of Interviews with Transportation Stakeholders Group

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) is updating the Statewide Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) to ensure the plan meets the state's needs through the year 2030 and to ensure it complies with new transportation planning requirements of SAFETEA-LU (Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users).

As part of the public participation plan, the Department formed a Transportation Stakeholders Group (TSG) to serve as a review body to provide technical and policy input to the plan update. In late March and early April, HDR Alaska staff contacted members of the TSG by phone prior to the group's first meeting to introduce the Statewide LRTP project and solicit a broad assessment of Alaska's transportation system. Below are the interview questions followed by a summary of the responses:

Question 1: Looking back over the past 10 years, what have been the most important/biggest changes that have affected Alaska's transportation systems?

Many TSG members responded that overall improvements to the state's highways—particularly the National Highway System upgrades including the Glenn, Seward, and Sterling—which improved access and relieved congestion in urban areas, have been among the most important changes.

Funding was another frequent answer to the first question. Members said that lack of funding, increased federal earmarks, and funding eligibility were growing concerns.

One member liked that the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) has brought about more objectivity and less politics since projects need to be justified, while others noted that the process is cumbersome, takes away DOT's flexibility, and does not adequately address communities' transportation needs since the STIP tends to push project timelines back.

Members also said there was a lack of community input and tribal consultation; the State hasn't really developed plans in consultation with local government. Although one member said that agency planners are visiting rural areas more.

Other comments included that tourism needs seem to drive infrastructure projects, and that the Alaska Marine Highway System is important to the state—not just the Southeast. Also mentioned were the importance of international designations at the Anchorage airport and the Anchorage and Dutch Harbor ports.

Question 2: What do you believe are the most significant transportation issues facing the state, your community/region, and your affiliated organization today?

A number of members said an important transportation issue affecting the state is the lack of adequate operations and maintenance funding. Many respondents said that there's often capital start-up funding but no planning for costs associated with the project after it's built. A related issue is the size of the ferry system operating deficit and the concern that it will be difficult to

impossible to sustain in the long term. A member noted that significant state general fund money is spent on highways, airports and ferries, but not on transit.

The increase in construction materials and fuel costs are a worrisome factor in transportation project construction across the state.

Members said another important transportation issue is creating efficient freight corridors to alleviate congestion issues in Anchorage, Glitter Gulch at Denali Park, and the Richardson Highway, for example.

Other significant issues were infrastructure construction and improvements to support mega-projects like the gas pipeline, Knik Arm Crossing, and mining projects; federal funds being earmarked for urban projects and mega-projects which leaves less money for smaller road and airport projects; and the need for a statewide planning implementation strategy. A related concern is that National Highway System projects are dependent on the STIP and are consistently being bumped and delayed.

Question 3: Looking into the future what do you see as the long term issues or trends affecting the demand for transportation in Alaska?

Safety and maintenance, including safe and efficient movement of freight, was a recurring answer of TSG members to the third question. Members said that with global warming and erosion issues, there will be a greater need for rehabilitation and facilities maintenance.

Increasing cost of energy; the aging of society and urban sprawl were mentioned as long-term concerns that will impact transportation.

Lack of funding and increased competition for funding were also mentioned as long term issues affecting transportation in Alaska. Many growth-related projects will be needed in Mat-Su and Anchorage, and if fully funded will easily use all the existing sources of funding.

Members also said that project sustainability needs to be factored into any transportation planning; and mega-projects, like the gas pipeline, will need funding for facilities upgrades and overall infrastructure.

Other comments included the need for alternative modes of transportation and access to community transportation; concern for the future of the Alaska Marine Highway System and its sustainability; creating a state-funded construction program to allow the state to become less reliant on federal funds; increasing use of technology; and creating efficient inter-modal connections between water, rail, air, and road.

Question 4: Similarly, what do you see as long term issues facing local and state government agencies that provide transportation facilities and services?

Most members agreed that insufficiency of funding is the most significant issue facing local and state government agencies. Many called for a state-funded construction program, and stressed the need for increased maintenance and operations funding into the future, as the recent State budget surpluses will “not last forever.”

Growing urban populations will make it increasingly difficult to move large volumes of traffic over the road system; better transit needs to be developed. A corollary mentioned by several members is that local government needs to assume more responsibility for local roads.

Other comments included more realistic planning for large projects to uncover high maintenance costs and to avoid high-cost projects (for example, Whittier Tunnel); upgrading and maintaining airport facilities; retiring experienced staff, lack of incoming staff, and loss of institutional knowledge; and the issue that Alaska's fuel taxes are not meeting the state's needs.

Question 5: What do you think are the top priorities for a statewide transportation plan to address to be of most value to the state and your community/region?

Members said that solving the long-term operations and maintenance funding issue is key. A related issue mentioned is making the Marine Highway system more efficient and developing a clear state policy with regard to the ferry system.

Strong coordination between potentially affected interests during planning is important and that plans need to be realistic. The need for highway upgrades and connectivity was also a recurring comment. Other comments included the need to alleviate urban congestion and create inter-modal connectors. A member also stressed that land use controls in conjunction with transportation development will be essential to control sprawl and contain transportation costs.

Question 6: From your understanding of the current transportation planning, funding, and decision making process, how do you think the system could change to be more effective?

Many members said that engaging more people in the process, from planning to conceptual levels, and in rural as well as urban areas, would make the system more effective. Some people in the group also mentioned getting past the political and bureaucratic barriers would improve the system, especially the STIP process. Others mentioned that elimination of earmarks would improve the process.

Question 7: Any other comments?

Overall, TSG members are looking forward to hearing different perspectives during the upcoming meetings. One person commented that when political decisions are being made, unpredictability is the outcome. Another member suggested that the State should consider keeping the TSG intact to provide input during the implementation of the Statewide LRTP.